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SUBJECT: MEKONG SUBREGION ANTI-DRUG COOPERATION

1. (U) Summary: At a recent six-party ministerial-level anti-drug conference in Hanoi, Thailand and China pushed hard for more concrete action against ATS and precursor chemicals. Conferees agreed that border liaison offices were effective and should be expanded, but one visited by poloff on the Vietnamese side of the Vietnam-China border appeared poorly equipped and relatively inactive. The conferees signed off on a UNODC project supporting the extension of the MOU partnership process, including a fifty percent cost contribution from the member countries. End Summary.

BIANNUAL MINISTERIAL MEETING ON DRUGS

2. (U) From September 23-25, Vietnam hosted the Senior Officials Committee and Ministerial Meetings of the Signatory Countries to the 1993 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Drug Control, including Vietnam, China, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, and Laos. The purpose of the meeting was to review the progress of the twelve ongoing individual projects that make up the Subregional Action Plan on Drug Control (total budget: \$15 million) and seven pipeline projects envisioned for the future (total budget: \$4 million).

3. (U) Thailand and China were successful in persuading the group to include a paragraph in the Joint Hanoi Declaration on Amphetamine-Type Stimulants (ATS) and precursors, although not in obtaining new projects addressing these problems. The conferees also signed an MOU approving a new project continuing the SOC and Ministerial Meeting process, with 50 percent funding from member countries. (Previously, 100 percent of the funding for these meetings came from the UN Office of Drugs and Crime.) In addition, the participants agreed that border liaison offices were valuable for transnational cooperation against drugs and crime in the Mekong subregion, and that Vietnam should open three new border liaison offices in addition to the existing three offices along the borders with Laos, Cambodia, and China.

THAR SHE BLOs

3. (U) According to Deputy Section Chief Dr. Tran Xuan Sac of the Department of Social Evils Prevention of the Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs, Vietnam had two major objectives for the conference: to demonstrate its commitment to combating international drug trafficking, and to develop the border liaison office program further. Both were achieved, he told poloff. Dr. Sac said that the BLO with China (in the town of Mong Cai, on the coast) was particularly effective, having solved the problem of "ineffective government-to-government communication." Vietnamese media also directed recent attention to the BLO in Mong Cai, doing a television feature on the office and giving it credit for "a number" of heroin and marijuana seizures.

4. (U) The BLOs in Vietnam were set up in 1999 under a Japan-funded regional UNODC project called "Development of Cross-Border Law Enforcement Cooperation in East Asia." The BLOs also receive computer-based training materials and guidance from another UNODC project. UNODC is now considering ways to expand BLO counternarcotics cooperation to encompass trafficking in persons, as well.

BLO IN MONG CAI NO HIVE OF ACTIVITY, BUT NOT USELESS

5. (U) Poloff visited the BLO in Mong Cai on October 2. The two-room office is located inside the Mong Cai People's Committee headquarters, and is sparsely furnished. Equipment consists of a single computer with a printer, a copier, and a telephone. The computer is not hooked up to the Internet, and the phone has not worked in six months, according to Deputy Chief of the BLO Major Colonel Hoang Thanh Nhung. Despite these setbacks, Nhung claimed, the office worked well. The computer, even when not connected to the Internet, is useful for producing computer-based

training using materials provided by the UNODC, he added. He noted that the landline phone was not a problem since contact with the Chinese BLO was primarily via cell phone. Chief of the BLO (and vice-chairman of the Mong Cai People's Committee) Duong Van Co said separately that Vietnamese border liaison officers met their Chinese counterparts on a scheduled basis once a month, and more frequently if a case came up that warranted cross-border consultation. Co and Nhuong both attributed increased marijuana and heroin seizures to more cooperation between the two sides. However, Co admitted that the two sides conducted joint operations "rarely, if at all."

16. (U) Comment: From the Vietnamese perspective, the conference was a success. Minister of Public Security Le Hung Anh had the opportunity to network with his regional counterparts, and the Prime Minister and a Deputy Prime Minister came to the conference to speak, have their pictures taken, and meet the other ministers. The GVN is clearly wedded to these BLOs and will welcome their expansion, even if the BLOs' current track records are likely less impressive than the prominent Vietnamese news coverage of several drug seizures and arrests would suggest. Nonetheless, more cooperation is still better than less or none.
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